

“Playing the Percentages” GPPC 11-11-18
Exodus 16:9-21, Mark 12:38-44

We’re excited that our fine pastoral intern, Sarah Seaton-Todd, will be preaching her very first sermon on November 25. Sarah has not taken any preaching classes yet. So she’s borrowed a couple of my old homiletics textbooks from seminary, brushed the sand out of the etching in the stone tablets, and skimmed over the hieroglyphics. She and I have also talked through a basic sermon preparation process.

One thing you may already know about sermons is that, like other forms of address such as speeches, they tend follow certain forms. For example, the “old school” sermon form was sometimes called “three points and a prayer” or “three points and a poem.” Some of you have heard these kind of sermons. Here’s an example. Point one—you’re a sinner. Point two—God loves you anyway. Point three—you ought to live a thankful and obedient life in response. Three points—then close with an inspiring prayer, poem, or song. Anybody ever heard a sermon shaped with this form?

Other sermon forms tend to be responsive to the actual shape of the biblical texts themselves. For example...“Here’s a prevailing view, but here’s the gospel view.” Or “Explore, explain, apply.” Or “Here’s a biblical story. Here’s a contemporary story.” Or “Problem/Solution.” You get the idea.

And then there is another sermon form you may also have heard, a form we’ll use this morning. The preacher points out several potential (but wrong) paths, before naming the right one. “Not this, not this, not this either, but this.”

So Moses and the people of Israel are making their way through the wilderness. And you know how the story goes. They are consistently trusting and thankful to God, right? Nope. They trust God about as far as they can *throw* God (not very far), and they complain about as much as the crowd beseeching the referees at a high school football game. And it’s pretty theatrical stuff. “Moses, why did you bring us out into the wilderness to kill us? At least while we were slaves back in Egypt we had plenty to eat.”

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God hears all this, and apparently stifles the urge to laugh or do something drastic. God says to Moses, “I’ve heard my people griping. Tell them I’m going to give them all the meat and bread they need.”

And you may remember how it goes. God provides some sort of edible stuff on the ground, manna, pronounced *man-hu*, Hebrew for “What is it?” (Not a compliment.)

And Moses says, “It’s the bread God has given you.”

So the people gather the manna, and there’s just the right amount—not too much, not too little. And Moses instructs the people not to take more than they need, especially not to hoard any overnight. But some people don’t listen. They hoard some of the manna, and by the next morning, it breeds worms and it becomes foul.

The lesson is clear enough, isn’t it? God provides for us in abundance. There is enough food and money and land in this world for all. But when the people of God start hoarding instead of trusting, things turn rotten. And when the people of God get greedy, it really stinks.

Don’t take this path. Not this.

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Then we hear Jesus teaching. He says “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Well, who are the scribes? One Bible scholar says “they are experts in and teachers of the Law...” (Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 582.) A fellow pastor says they are “politicians.” (Deborah Rahn Clemens in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 386.) Either way they already have elevated status. But for these particular scribes Jesus mentions, this status is not enough. Instead of settling for the cloaks most men of the time wore, these scribes wear long, flowing robes that signify great wealth. And like long-necked turtles in the sun, they bask in being greeted with respect in the marketplace, securing the best seats in the synagogue and places of honor at banquets.

Christians, beware when we see leaders who preen like peacocks with self-congratulations, who need to be the center of attention, and

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who thrive on status, power, and wealth. Beware of those kind of leaders. And beware that we are not these kind of people ourselves.

Jesus says these scribes “devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” These “leaders” use their power to take away the subsistence of widows, people who are vulnerable. In fact, some Bible experts think that the “long prayers” these leaders say in public are actually spoken as a ploy to exploit money from the very widows they are praying for. (Douglas R.A. Hare, *Mark*, 164.)

Christians, beware when leaders claim they are implementing policies that will help the vulnerable when, in fact, those policies will take away from the vulnerable the very protections they rely on, and the very safety net we have agreed upon as a nation. Beware and pay attention. As Jesus says, those who use their position to puff themselves up and to exploit the vulnerable “will receive the greater condemnation.” God will judge them more harshly.

Don’t take this path. Not this.

But finally, we see Jesus sitting opposite the temple treasury. Many rich people are putting in large amounts. Along comes a poor widow

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who drops in two little copper coins, the smallest monetary denomination of the time. Jesus is watching and he calls his disciples to him to teach them. He says, “This poor widow has put in more than everybody else, because the others gave out of their abundance but she gave out of her poverty. She gave everything she had, all that she had to live on.” The Greek word Jesus uses is *bios*, which, you probably know means life. This poor widow has given her life.

Take this path. Do this. After all we’ve been told *not* to do, finally we’re given an example of what we should do.

Now I could be wrong, but I don’t think God wants you and me to give our last two pennies to the church. At the same time, this poor widow serves as an example and a symbol for us.

You see God does indeed want our money to do God’s ministry in the world. But that’s not enough. What God really wants is what the poor widow finally gives, not spare change but her life.

Our life given back to God in gratitude—that’s what God wants from you and me. And that’s what Christian stewardship is all about.

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God gives each of us life, a short time on the earth. It's not something we've earned. It's purely a gift. And we can do almost anything we want with that life—wise or foolish, good or evil.

But here's the secret. When we give our lives back to God out of thanksgiving, this is the best life we can possibly have. When we focus not on hoarding stuff, or showing off, or getting respect, or, God forbid, oppressing others to satisfy our greed, but on serving God with gratitude that is the true joy.

We serve God with our time, abilities, and money. All three are important, because as the widow knew, God wants our whole life, not just a scrap of time or pocket change. As the widow understood, it's about playing the percentages. So we witness people getting involved and using percentages of their time and abilities to serve God.

Let me suggest that everybody in this church who is able-bodied should be trying to worship God regularly and have at least one ministry you are doing to serve God with your time and abilities. You don't have to do a million things, but you ought to have at least one thing. Contact me if you need help getting involved.

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We also witness our members giving percentages of money with deep gladness and even with some sacrifice. My suggestion is that if you are in severe financial hardship right now, you should *not* give much money. Allow the rest of us to cover for you until your circumstances improve.

But if you are not facing a financial crisis, then I urge you to give back to God with gratitude and with a generosity that pinches you a little, makes you live more simply, so that you might do more of God's work with the life God has given you.

Our congregation has about 400 members, and our church's entire yearly budget is less than \$600,000. That pays the salaries for four full-time employees, and several part-time employees. It also pays for the electricity, heat, water, insurance for the building, van, and bus, office supplies, maintenance on the church vehicles, custodial services, and most building maintenance. It pays for Christian education materials for children, youth, and adults. It pays for ministries of compassion and mission in Greensboro and around the world. It pays for our music ministry. It pays for the church of today and even some towards

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tomorrow. (The video you'll see in a moment gives you a taste of where the money goes.)

As you may know, we typically run financial deficits throughout the year. And then we hope and pray for enough giving in December to help us end the year breaking even or at least ending with only a small deficit. The leadership of this church believes in being responsible with God's money. So we refuse to rack up huge yearly debts.

Right now, we are also managing to keep expenses down by doing without an associate pastor (\$60,000 a year) and a congregational nurse (\$8,000 a year). How much could we grow spiritually and expand our ministry, if we were able to restore those positions?

As Jesus pointed out with the poor widow's generosity, it all comes down to playing the percentages. What percentage of your income do you give back to God each year? Our session members (members of our governing body) are averaging just under 5%. Could you increase by 1% or more this year?

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And what percentage of your time and abilities are you giving back to God each year? Could you also increase a little? Do you have at least one ministry you are doing that brings you joy?

So it's not about guilt. It's not about greed. (That really stinks, you know.) It's not about showing off, or trying to get respect, or oppressing others. Not this. Not this. Not this.

But this. God gives us all we have, everything. Life, love, forgiveness, hope, this church, eternity. God gives us everything, and then grants us the opportunity to grow in faith and to share what God is doing, God's love on the earth, with the glad and generous stewardship of our time, abilities, and money. So "come ye thankful people, come." Come and share the blessings we have received. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal